



FOCUS

NEWS & VIEWS

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Focus 1

"Competence in Written Expression": A Serious Problem At The University Level

"The inability of a large proportion of university students whose first language is English to express themselves clearly and correctly in that language is causing widespread concern. While some disciples of McLuhan claim that this concern is irrelevant and that any attempt to return to approaches taken in the past are doomed to failure, the fact remains that, for the foreseeable future, written and verbal communication are likely to be widely used and one can easily accept that, this being the case, such communication should be at least intelligible and preferably precise. Most institutions are worrying about this situation and some are endeavoring to do something about it".

University Curriculum Coordinating Committee
Report to Senate on:
"Competence in Written Expression"

The fact that, approximately 75% of students tested for their writing skills failed to achieve the kind of performance expected at the university level is a serious problem indeed. At the present time, two committees are looking into this problem of "Competence in Written Expression". They are: The University Curriculum Coordinating Committee Task Force on Administration of Testing...and the "Arts and Science Faculty Curriculum Committee" (on merits, demerits and reasons). At this time these two committees are working with four basic documents dealing with this very serious, very difficult problem of competence in written expression. The following discussion will try to deal with and explain the relevant points in each of these documents.

The UCCC report to Seante on "Competence in Written Expression" (final draft, April 14th, 1977) is the first document that will be considered. The UCCC report concerned itself with a number of items related to the question of writing skills. It dealt first with the initial importance of recognizing the deficiency in writing skills of many University students. (Identification of sub-standard performance). The next item considered was the method of identification. Two methods were suggested, testing and referral. Testing, of course, meant that some kind of test would be designed in order to assess students' writing abilities. Referral means that, a professor might recognize that a student has serious writing problems, and hopefully would, in turn, refer the student to someone who might be able to help them. UCCC members, however, found that testing presented certain difficulties. These were: timing of the test (pre-entrance, some period into U.L. etc.); whether the test should be voluntary or obligatory;

and whether the test should be ~~eliminary~~ ^{eliminary} (meaning the test would be a requirement for Admission to University, failure to pass the test would mean refusal to accept the students into the University programme).

The problems brought up about testing present even further difficulties in themselves. The problem of voluntary vs. obligatory brings up the point of the tests' usefulness. If the test is voluntary it is likely that the test will reach far fewer people than actually need it. If it is obligatory it could meet with stiff opposition. If eliminary tests were implemented unilaterally it could be economically suicide for Concordia. It would only be feasible if other universities adopted the same measures. On the other hand, if the test is not eliminary, then it is diagnostic. This means a whole new set of problems and questions. The basic question being what happens if such a diagnostic test is implemented?

If a student is diagnosed as having writing problems the next step is how do you rectify the situation. UCCC members felt that remedial activity is a possible sure but remedial action brings up the crucial questions of: format, financing, awarding of credit etc. Immediate problems are seen in all these areas. The first problem or question the UCCC report dealt with was the format of remedial actions. Would they be regular courses or work on a module system? The next considerations all dealt with the problems inherent in any kind of remedial action. Cost is the priority consideration, of course. Experts have estimated that any remedial action undertaken at Concordia would be very expensive, perhaps amounting to approximately \$120,00.00. The next consideration is once again voluntary vs. obligatory. If the student obviously needs help with writing skills, should he or she be forced to take remedial courses? Other important questions brought up were whether or not the students would be awarded a credit for such a course; would fees be charged if it were a non-credit course; and finally would such a course be the criterion for graduation?

All the above mentioned problems and questions came up in the UCCC report. As a result of lengthy discussion on these points the UCCC has made a number of recommendations:

- 1) that the University state publicly its concern over the sub-standard competence in written expression of a high percentage of students entering University.
- 2) that students wanting to improve their writing skills are given occasion to do so.
- 3) that a test, on written competency once validated, be administered to all new admissions, to undergraduate programmes whose first language is English.
- 4) that once a universal testing operation is launched, it should be made available on a voluntary basis, to students already in the University.

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5) ...that a minimal credit value be attached to remedial activities discretion being left to individual faculties as to whether it may be counted toward their various programmes.

6) that no special charge be levied for initial testing, although consideration might be given to charging a fee to those presenting themselves for re-testing.

7) that a calendar entry should state clearly that the level of written expression will be taken into account in the grading of all written assignments and examinations.

the next document to be considered is from the Curriculum Planning Committee (CPC) to the Sir George & Arts faculty council (Report no. 88, May 6, 1977). This report suggested endorsement for many of the UCCC recommendations while at the same time it made a number of its own:

1) that the University publicize its belief in the existence of normative English and, its concern over the failure of many University students to express themselves correctly.

2) that a diagnostic test be administered to all entrants to the University's undergraduate programmes whose first language is English.

3) that students who are recognized as having a problem in writing be required to take the appropriate courses.

4) that remedial activity be offered to students in the form of modules that would concentrate on the weaknesses of the student as discovered in the test; and that each module be assigned a credit value of 1.

5) that the credits earned by students in remedial activities be declared on transcripts but be in excess of the credits required for the B.A. or B.Ed. degree.

6) that all programmes leading to the B.A. and B.Ed. degrees incorporate a minimum number of courses in which a substantial amount of written work is included.

7) that 18 be the number of credits to be taken by all students from among courses identified as requiring special attention to expression as well as to disciplinary content.

The third document is actually an extract from the minutes of the May 6 and 24 meetings of the Sir George Arts Faculty Council (A.F.C.). In effect, the minutes listed are the members on the AFC response to the CPC report no. 88 (discussed above). Professor Brian one member of the Council, noted that the UCCC had come out with recommendations without consulting either the English Department

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or TESL (teaching English as a Second Language). He found this somewhat negligent. He added that because of this he could accept the UCCC report in principle but not detail. Another member, Professor Verthuy added an interesting comment. She said she would prefer to see a demand for literacy in 90 of 90 credits, rather than the 18 of 90 which the C.P.C. proposed. Other more negative comments on the C.P.C. report came from Professor Jordan, who believes that reading and writing must be learned at an early stage. Jordan added that any remedial action at the University level is too late. Professor Jordan also stated ... also that the ability to read and write is the property of a privileged few and that it would be impossible to achieve universal literacy.

Generally the A.F.C. gave their approval to a number of the C.P.C. recommendation. some of these were :

- 1) that the University make it known that the problem of competence in writing exists.
- 2) that the C.P.C. report be directed toward the fall of 1978 , when all students would have to take the diagnostic test.
- 3) that modules be used and that credits obtained from such a course be declared on transcripts.
- 4) that 18 out of 90 credits should be taken and these 18 should be designed around writing skills.
- 5) that no student be admitted to a 300 level course or higher if he is not registered for or has completed a remedial course that was recommended by the administrators of the diagnostic test.

The final and perhaps most important document comes from Barbara Opala, a member of the English Department on the Sir George Campus. The document is significant for two things. For one it deals with the questionnaire designed by Professor Opala for undergraduates, to test their writing skills. The results of this are very revealing. Of the 515 tested only 18 students were designated as very good writers, to whom help in the remedial area would be of no use. 112 students wrote well but it was found that these could use more training in the development of precision of expression and in the polishing of style. On the other hand, there were 305 students considered as needing help in all areas, and 77 were rated as students with serious language problems. In other words 75% of the students tested failed to meet the written competency expected at the university level. It seems quite obvious that many undergraduates are in need of considerable help with their writing skills something must be done. This point brings up the second ... significant thing about Opala's report.

If Opala's suggestions are put into effect it would mean the compulsory testing of all new entrants to the university by next fall. Further more students may be forced to take remedial English

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courses without perhaps receiving credit for such courses. This could have serious implications for the student. The problem is a delicate one, and it is hoped that whatever decision is made with regard to remedial action, it will be made with the student's best interest in mind.

To end this rather lengthy discussion of an important problem concerning all students we would like to add that it is our opinion that in the question of Competence in writing, the Professor has very serious responsibilities to the student that he must not shirk.

"...the effectiveness with which language is used (written or spoken) must be the acknowledged responsibility of all teachers, whatever their subject and what ever the level at which they teach."

Statement by: the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English CACUTE.

Any one interested in reading the above documents in their entirety can come by Room 304 of the L.S.A. building and look at our copy.

Library Questionnaire.

The L.S.A. Library Questionnaire has been successfully completed. There were approximately 900 responses. The L.S.A. would like to thank all students who took the time out to complete the questionnaires. Also thanks to those students who distributed the questionnaires, and to those people in the computer room who processed the questionnaires for us.

Preliminary results, that is response rates and the mean (average) response for each question will be out within the week. Keep your eyes on the Loyola News and upcoming issues of Focus for a full report of results.

The Better Teaching Bureau

The B.T.B. is alive and well. Students are requested to drop in to their departmental associations offices or room 301 and 307 in the L.S.A. building and pick up a B.T.B. form. It also might be a good idea to take a few forms and bring them to a class and have some of your friends or class mates fill them out. The sooner students start returning completed forms. The sooner the B.T.B. can start working for you.

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Foreign Investment Discussion Planned

The education Department of the L.S.A. is planning a discussion on foreign investment in Canada. Participants will include a representative from the Committee for an Independent Canada, The Royal Bank and the Foreign Investment Review Agency. Although nothing is definite it is also hoped that Professor Carrie Levitt, Author of Silent Surrender, might be able to participate. Keep posted to Focus and the News for further developments on this upcoming event.

The L.S.A. Board of Directors

Although the Board has been under much deserved criticism lately they did finally manage to get quorum for a meeting last week. A number of items that have needed attention for a long while were at last taken care of. For example, Dave Murphy was ratified as Carnival Chairman and the Tennis Association was accepted as a member association of the L.S.A. At the same time the Loyola Ski Association was refused the same status. It is expected that this last item will come up again before the Board.

Even while many Board Members deserve the criticism they have been getting of late, there is one member Kate Hodgson whose work has gone unnoticed. Kate has participated not only on the Board but on the Senate Library Committee, on Departmental Council and helped with the L.S.A. library questionnaire. Thus, we can greatly see that, not all Board members are apathetic. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK KATE!

Third Re-Evaluation Plan Presented

University Senate has made yet another attempt to draft the University's new academic regulations. Senate has finally rejected the "Sheldon Document" as a basis with which to work from. In its place senate has adopted an Engineering Document(US -77-14-1) (see included at the back of this issue of Focus). This is the third proposal Senate has gone to. Although it does seem that this will be the re-evaluation scheme senate adopts, it has taken so much time to agree on anything that one has to wonder if new regulations will ever appear in this academic year.

The major difference between the "Engineering faculty Council Document" and the "Sheldon Document" is that the EFC plan is much vaguer in its tone. It combines the bureaucratic approach with the "due process" approach by having 3 major steps: If the student is dissatisfied the following steps may be taken:

1) Student goes to Professor

2) Student goes to their Chairman or Dean

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3) Student goes to an appeals committee.

Keep posted to further issues of Focus to learn what Senate finally decides academic re-evaluation.

C.U.S.A.

The last CUSA General Assembly meeting was held on November 23rd 1977 at the Sir George Campus. Two of the Most important motions brought up and passed were: 1) the ratification of Steve Denis as Financial Vice-President of the CUSA Assembly. Steve is also on the L.S.A. Goard and representing Commerce Students. 2) that there be a university wide week of protest to demand better library services at Concordia. The last item was presented by CUSA Assembly President, John Mathewson and represents one of the most talked about issues on both campuses of late.

The Learning Development Office is Working For Students.

Many students on campus have never heard of the Learning Development Office and this is unforunate because L.D.O. works for students as well as Faculty. L.D.O. was created by the University in the summer of 1973 as a response to Facutly and student interest in improving the quality of University instruction.

The specific goals of L.D.O. are :1) to offer services and support to faculty in matters of course design, 2) development and evaluation 3) to serve as a resource center 4) to provide workshops 5) individual and group consultation to interested faculty members students and administration 6) to support the development of educational research into areas that would be of use to Concordia 7) to serve as a consulting service in the field of higher education.

L.D.O. also has some interesting plans for the g futur . for example, L.D.O. is considering the possible implementation of a course entitled "Becoming a More Effective Consumer of Your Own Education," This course is designed under the assumption that students within a university do not necessarily have the skills they need to learn effectively. Some areas that would be covered in the course are: Personal growth, interpersonal skills, and self-directed learning.

If anyone is interested in finding out more about L.D.O. just drop by their office anytime it is located at 2492 West Broadway.

Bits and Pieces

New Publications Available The minutes of the 10th semi-annual conference of the National Union of Students held in Calgary, October 21-23 1977 and Horizons, a publication from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities of Ontario are now available in the External Department office Room 30 From the promises, promises department

Due to a number of unforeseen problems the student Hand Book and Directory has missed many proposed dates of release. It is now expected that it will appear this week or early next week... From the ops Department. We stand corrected on an item mentioned in the last issue of Focus. It was stated that James Counihan would

be the fourth L.S.A.U member on the CUSA assembly... we would also like to apologize for a printing error last issue which stated that it was the 8th issue when actually it was only the 7th ... this is the last issue of Focus for 1977. At this time we would like to wish everyone a Happy Holiday. See you in 1978...

OH YES BEFORE I FORGET CONTARY TO WHAT LOYOLA NEWS BELIEVES SUE STEBEN AND MYSELF (ANNE STANWAY) ARE MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE. SO I WOULD THANK YOU (THE NEWS) THAT THE NEXT TIME YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE ONE OF YOUR SUPPOSED GOOD PEOPLE TAKING PICTURES OF THE EXECUTIVE REMEMBER THAT SUE AND MYSELF ARE ALSO EXECUTIVES. YOU MAY SAY "BUT YOU DID'T SAY ANYTHING AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY " TRUE! BUT THE INFORMATION SERVICES DEPT. DOES ALOT ; WHICH TO OUR KNOWLEDGE THE NEWS HAS NEVER BEEN BOTHERED TO FIND OUT ABOUT... THANKYOU

"HAPPY HOLIDAY"

Statement of EFC on Academic Re-evaluation

1. EFC recognizes that an appeal for academic re-evaluation may arise due to a variety of reasons, examples being:
 - Dissatisfaction with the grading of work submitted
 - Dissatisfaction with the procedures used for grading
 - Dissatisfaction with the method of teaching, with the textbooks, with laboratories, with the learning environment, with the instructor.
2. EFC believes that each appeal for academic re-evaluation should in the first instance be directed by the student to the instructor. It is expected that the majority of problems will be resolved at this level.
3. EFC believes that a student who is not satisfied with the instructor's re-evaluation, should have access to an appeals mechanism which will:
 - a) permit him/her to raise the matter at once with a University official (e.g. Chairman or Dean or his/her delegate).
 - b) allow him/her to receive immediately or within a few days a decision on how the matter will be handled (e.g. through a re-evaluation of the work, an investigation of grading procedures, etc.
 - c) ensure that the re-evaluation or investigation is completed and the student informed of the result within a reasonable period of time.
4. EFC believes that the student who is dissatisfied with the handling of his/her case should be able to appeal the decision to a standing committee of Faculty Council who will have the authority to review the case in its entirety, and whose decision will be final.
5. EFC is confident that the members (students, faculty and administrators) of the Engineering Faculty will act in a rational manner and that few cases will reach the committee stage.
6. EFC opposes any move which will result in the unnecessary proliferation of committees since:

the inevitable delays in convening a committee to hear the case, to gather evidence, to ask for a re-evaluation, to receive the re-evaluation, to pass judgement on the re-evaluation will be unacceptable to Engineering students.

...Continued

- there is no evidence to justify any allegation that committees are "fairer" than individuals in their treatment of students.

Finally EFC notes that its approach is based on a long judicial tradition , in that simple cases are handled by individuals (the policeman, the immigration officer, the judge) and that only complex cases are referred to committees, i.e. juries.

7. EFC notes that engineering students, faculty, and administrators have not been consulted on this matter. EFC therefore requests that before Senate makes any final decisions on the matters, that it first seek the advice of EFC, and presumably other Faculty Councils.